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CULTURE AND DILETTANTISM WITH THE
FRENCH.

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TO HAVE national culture and be free from barbarism seems to be the primary moral requisite for a people which is to exercise the rights of war, if not the rights of peace. Russia has been shown to be primitive, England practical, Germany transcendental, France æsthetical. In our own country, the sense of national unpreparedness along lines martial seems as yet to have been unaccompanied by the feeling of unfitness in things fine and intellectual. Can we fight without arms? Should we fight without ideals? As far as France is concerned, no one seems to have thought to question the right of the French to conserve their national ideals, so that it is not inappropriate but quite fruitful to inquire concerning the sincerity and consistency with which the Gallic mind asserts its artistic and intellectual principles. No critic dare repudiate the Gothic of the French nor deny that in France the drama received a treatment worthy of the classic master; if, in painting, France had no Renaissance comparable to the Florentine, the Barbizon men of 1830 revealed the fact that "painting" may vie with "art." Granted that French art may, at times, become Parisian, granted further that Gallic æstheticism has known the flamboyant, the decadent, the risqué, the superiority of the French creative genius needs no apology.

But, the historical fact of culture is not necessarily one with the internal, spiritual principle of belief in culture; hence, one must meet French enlightenment with the query concerning the authenticity of that which the French genius has produced. Is French fineness culture or dilettantism? Has France shown faith in her works? Where the culture-problem is raised, it must be admitted that France has been the leader in the attempt to scrutinize the work of

the intellect, has been equally advanced in weighing all culture-values. At the same time, it may be said that, in the history of French thought, practically every thinker who has considered the truth and worth of the intellectual life has concluded against intellectualism, so that the nation that has produced *les intellectuels* has never given a justification for them. For this reason, it is important to consider whether, in the last analysis, French culture is not dilettantism; whether the savant does not employ ideas as forms of play rather than as means of work.

When the idea of dilettantism is applied to the French mind, even when this is done in a furtive manner by one who would learn the secret of French culture, such dilettantism must be understood in the major sense. Such dilettantism as that in which the French excel consists in a full exercise of intellectual power, but always with the conviction that nothing will ever come of it. In a sentence from Renan, as quoted by Huneker, this paradox appears in most brilliant manner: "Man sees clearly at the hour which is now striking that he will never know anything of the supreme cause of the universe, or of his own destiny. Nevertheless he wishes to be talked to about all that." In the fatal "nevertheless" lies the secret of French dilettantism; the Gallic mind will handle things intellectual even when it does not believe that they will serve as the tools of truth. From this skeptical attitude the Anglican mind has been spared, because the Anglican mind has ever felt that the perceptible must supply the concomitant of its ideas; in a corresponding manner, the Teutonic genius has felt that reason is sufficient to carry man through to the end. Being neither wholly realistic nor wholly idealistic, the Gallic intellect has destined itself to an unconvincing form of culture in accordance with which neither the imitative nor the creative has appeared to authenticate the true, the good, the beautiful.

Unable to decide between the realistic and the idealistic in general, the French mind has suffered from such a superb attempt to comprehend the full meaning of culture that it

has failed to distinguish between beauty and ugliness, good and evil, truth and error in particular; its special demon has been "the horrible mania of certitude," as Renan called it. In the attempt to explain this dilettantism in French culture, Bourget has sought to attribute it to a mental confusion due to the presence of an infinite variety of objects with many an appropriate conflict among them, while Morice viewed it as the deadening of the creative powers under the narcotic influence of the faculties of comprehension. With both of these critics of national culture in France, the point of view has been found in certain traits of recent French thought, especially that of Ernest Renan and his school, but to the student of Gallic philosophy the presence of this intellectual contradiction seems perennial. From the beginning in the Renaissance to the days of contemporary symbolism, the French mind has been so versatile, so resourceful, as ever to be learning and never to come to the knowledge of the truth. Or, to express this same thought in a manner more meritorious, the Gallic mind has never known that dogmatism which has habitually characterized both Anglican and Teuton.

In the realm of poetics, it is not expected, perhaps, that the artist shall be dialectical and thus supply the metaphysical ground upon which to base the beautiful; and yet, where realities are not deduced, they must be taken for granted. It is here that the French mind has been faulty; it has attained to reality by neither reason nor faith, whence its perpetual dilettantism. The English mind has proceeded undismayed by doubt because the English mind has not felt the necessity of authenticating its assumptions. In Germany and, more recently, in Russia, the need for æsthetical terra firma has been supplied by a downright attempt to substantiate a metaphysics of life. Was not Goethe metaphysical; has not Dostœvsky been philosophical? Early in their spiritual history, the French acquired the habit of scrutinizing all the possible facets of truth without deciding upon any fixed point of view, an abhorrance for *idée fixe* perhaps. With Montaigne, it was

a perpetual, What do I know? an endless interrogative. From such heights of self-examination, Montaigne then turns to sense, and says, "One must be dumb in order to be wise—*il nous fault s'abestir pour nous assaigir.*" It was this same Montaigne who originally sought the consolations of the garden of work when the intellectual solution of the life-problem seemed in vain. From Montaigne, Voltaire, Goethe, and Turgenieff must have borrowed.

Not only in art as an interpreter of life, but in religion as well has this dilettantism of intellect made its painful presence felt; here, the genius of Pascal was shown in a style most classical. From the time of Pascal to the present, no nation has made such frequent use of the word truth, and yet no nation has laid less claim to that ideal. Pascal was at home in the human intellect, and yet his every thought seems to breathe nostalgia for the true. Without levity, this saintly and straightforward mind declared that he placed his affair upon truth as one would place a wager. Perhaps Pascal did not know that, in betting, one cannot win where one cannot lose, for he assumed that, whether he turned out to be mortal or immortal, he was sure to win by wagering virtue. Only the Gallic mind, and only the Gallic mind in dire extremity, could devise such an original notion. As Pascal, so Descartes; this formal thinker uses skepticism as a means of arriving at a truth which, in the end, he has not the mental courage to affirm, while in the process of truth-seeking he felt called upon to deny some of the most obvious things in human experience, as the consciousness of the lower animals.

Where, as in the classic drama, the French mind does come forth with confidence in man, it was only by virtue of a certain noble blindness to the realities of life that the æsthetic assertion could be made. In the *théâtre* of Corneille, "man" is considered in a manner so superior, so unique, so independent of nature that it seems to miss the point and to present, not man as such, but a quasi-human model constructed artificially from materials drawn by force from both classicism and Christianity. It is this

alienation from the natural order which, in the mind of M. Cambon, constitutes the chief difference between Corneille and Pierre Loti. The French seem never to have found Man, who evaded the Cartesian analysis and refused to identify himself with the heroes of Corneille. What, then, has the French mind to do but to exercise its noble dilettantism, its endless search after that which it knows it can never find? The Gallic has never been the finder, the *Trouvère*, of which its early literature gave promise. At times, it has been humanity raised to an impossible height above nature; at others, as in the case of Rousseau, it has been nature triumphing over humanity, never has it been humanity in its own true world. As a result, there has never been in French culture a pure humanism as this was experienced in ancient Athens, as this was enjoyed in the Florence of the Renaissance.

Humanism comes into being when there is correspondence between the facts of the exterior order and the values of inner life. Where stolid science abides by the testimony of the senses, where religion adheres to the spiritual values of an intuitive inward life, art must come in to reconcile the claims of the natural and spiritual. This work of reconciliation French art has never been able to accomplish; where it has taken hold of the natural, it has grasped too much of the sensuous; where it has treated of the spiritual, it has so Gallicized this as to make it *spirituelle*. In thus following, not the root, but the ramifications of both nature and spirit, in the course of which artistic procedure it has shown a fineness and developed a perfection elsewhere unknown, French culture has ever shown itself *précieuse*, decadent, dilettante.

To the question, Is culture true and valuable? the modern has almost always replied in the negative. With the Gallic genius, this is most eminently the case. Elder masters of culture, Aristotle among the ancients and Bacon with the moderns, did indeed affirm the validity and value of man's intellectual life; practically all other prophets have found it necessary to negate the free exercise of the

intellectual and æsthetical. Pre-eminent among the cultured opponents of culture stands Rousseau; indeed, one might hazard the hypothesis that, because of the supreme negation of culture presented by Rousseau, all who have come after him have found it expedient to follow his logic and thus conclude that liberal intellectualism makes for sorrow and disaster. Rousseau had before him the example of earlier French skeptics, but where Montaigne and Pascal had confined their attention to the individual, Rousseau advanced to a social point of view, whence he concluded that the influence of the arts and sciences had been a baneful one. From his eighteenth century position, Rousseau had the opportunity to observe how far afield the human mind may be drawn when it surrenders all to the powers of reason, for it was reason that had been supposed to support both religion and the state. Furthermore, the excessive fineness of France in the age of Louis Quatorze could not fail to offend the social sympathies of one who would lead something like a natural life.

In his argument against culture, Rousseau confines his attention to the political in general, the principle of political equality in particular. The culture of the arts and sciences has thus been disastrous in that it has brought about inequality among men not all of whom are fitted for intellectual advancement. With Plato, and Aristotle, too, this was the supreme reason for dividing men into classes, so that the aristocratic should have the opportunity of perfecting themselves intellectually, while the remainder of mankind should still find their place in an inferior order of society. Rousseau does not doubt that this is the real tendency of culture, but he questions whether it is a just and worthy one; his idea of a return to nature was advanced with the idea of readjusting men upon the new basis of equality. In his search after that life-principle which shall make man happy indeed, Rousseau finds it necessary to repudiate the culture of both the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, the arts of the one, the sciences of the other, so that his position is apparently that of the anti-

intellectualist. In all this, Rousseau, himself a product of the culture which he despises, still upholds the ideal of inward perfection by means of culture, except that, in his naturalistic and humanistic intuition, such culture should be more suggestive of the natural order whence man has sprung, more conducive to the happiness of the human order to which he belongs. Indeed, one of the most essential elements of Rousseau's doctrine is found in the idea of free self-realization coupled with the contemplation of one's own soul-states, a culture-ideal indeed. Hence, with two opposed culture-ideals before him, Rousseau so fails to develop a constructive culture as to relapse into characteristic Gallic dilettantism, or that culture which one may enjoy without finding it convincing.

In the attempt to enjoy culture without intellectualism, the French mind has not failed to observe how the contrast between culture and work is calculated to produce a painful antinomy in the mind of one who is alive to the ultimate welfare of his own nature in particular, humanity in general. Aristotle and Bacon, ensconced in their respective periods of successful culture, never hesitated to place the work of contemplation above the work of conquest. This arrangement seemed intolerable to the Enlightenment, where culture had advanced only as it had subordinated to the claims of the aristocracy the rights of the people. In a manner most dilettant, Voltaire turns to nature as the place of activity; where, with Rousseau, nature was the place of idyllic enjoyment, with Voltaire it became, as it were, the scene of useful work. "One must cultivate his garden—*il faut cultiver le jardin.*" In this fine maxim, Voltaire thinks to negate the intellect and affirm the will; yet it is to the "garden," not to raw nature that he would turn his energies. The "garden" is not the place of genuine work, rather does it suggest the relaxation and diversion of the man whose chief energies have previously gone forth in the field of intellectualism. Voltaire is dilettant in both culture and work, between which life-ideals his hesitating mind seems to urge him in shuttle-fashion back

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and forth. Thus to repudiate the intellect while recognizing and realizing the fact that the intellect will ever assert its rights is to make the culture-problem more than usually difficult, since it reduces the intellect to a mere play of thought whose dilettant effects can never be other than distressing.

This halting, uncertain intellectualism has never forsaken the Gallic spirit. When the nineteenth century offered Europe relief from the rationalism of the earlier epoch, other nations, especially the German, improved the opportunity to elaborate a characteristic and seemingly satisfactory form of speculative culture. The French still hesitated. Comte all but created an epoch when he came forth with his Positivism, but Positivism never satisfied its prophet, who turned from its forbidding formulas to the more Gallic mood of adoration, the adoration of idealized and feminized humanity. As Renan suggested, the French felt that they could never learn anything about that which concerns God and the soul, and yet they like to talk about such things. Indeed, it is the tendency to talk about problems which he cannot solve, rather than to cultivate the garden, which characterizes the dilettant, the augustly dilettant, spirit of France. At the latest dates, the Gallic mind is found neither believing nor doubting, but contemplating; as Huneker said of Anatole France, so one may say of the average French thinker, "He believes in the belief in God." Then, the case of Bergson, who seems to promise something for the future of French thought; but Bergson cannot quite come to an understanding with science, so that in the midst of his perplexities, he takes refuge in something quite Gallic, in "intuition."

If the Gallic mind has not overcome its dilettantism in considering things intellectual, it must be added that in the field of æsthetics, far more promising to the Gallic genius, it has again halted between two opinions. Excessive in its classicism, so that it could not really appreciate the freer methods of Shakespeare's dramatic art, the French genius was later found bending its energies in the direction

of Romanticism. Yet, even here, it could not resist the temptation to parallel the romantic with the realistic. France had its Hugo and De Vigny, but did it not express its meaning, and that even more thoroughly, in Stendhal and Balzac? The romanticism of Hugo was always more picturesque than philosophical, since Hugo's psychology of emotion was always of the dilettant type. Balzac was a "writer" such as might appear in any other highly favored nation; Balzac raises no questions, so that he escapes dilettantism because he never turns his observant idea inwards. Balzac observes where his fellow writers introspect. With Stendhal, it was otherwise, for Stendhal was psychological; as a result, Stendhal creates a cult, *beylisme*, or Individualism.

In Stendhal, that sensuous nature which elsewhere showed itself in such writers as Balzac, Zola, and De Maupassant was turned to something like good account in the elaboration of an original doctrine of æsthetics. Beyle-Stendhal defined beauty as "a promise of happiness"; in so doing, he emancipated Nietzsche, and others, too, from the formal æstheticism of the Germans, of Kant. Stendhal thus expresses the Gallic sense of beauty, yet even here there is all the dilettant uncertainty of beauty as a "promise." Will beauty ever fulfill that promise? The English waited for Burke's frankness to express the dictum, "Beauty is pleasure"; then, the English sat back and enjoyed. Among the Germans, Baumgarten and Kant demurred; then, they proceeded to idealize pleasure until, as "pleasure minus interest"; the æsthetic became anæsthetic. The Gallic artist must now regard beauty in still another manner; beauty shall not merely repose in the sense of pleasure, still less shall it neutralize the emotional; beauty shall be the excess of pleasure, the pleasure of beholding plus the pleasure of anticipating. No longer anæsthetic, the sense of beauty became aphrodisiac. The attitude of Beyle seems indeed easier to assume than that of Kant, since it is natural for the human mind to look upon beauty as that which is calculated to intensify normal pleasure and thus enhance

the objects of nature and history which the artist may choose. The landscape-painting which is the result of selective and synthetic work on the part of the painter, the romance which sifts the fine from amid the commonplace in human life, and the statue which artistically avoids the imperfections of human anatomy seem to yield the given pleasure of the object as a thing of nature, while they add the æsthetic pleasure due to creative, idealizing art. Yet, æsthetical science is more likely to be Kantian than Stendhalese. How is this to be explained?

The apparent failure of the French æstheticism of Stendhal is due to the fact that, with this extra-æsthetic doctrine of the beautiful, there is always the danger that art will run the risk of a dilettantism; that is, of decadence. Such was its fate in the hands of the French after Stendhal, when decadence and symbolism came in to prejudice the cause of the Grecian and Germanic ideal. Æsthetics became æstheticism, which is an exaggeration of the fundamental principle of beauty. The dilettantism of French æstheticism is thus one with the dilettantism of French culture; both consist in a treatment of the emotion or idea divorced from its object. First, it was thought for thought's sake; then it became, *l'art pour l'art*; the result is the same dilettantism which has been at once the guiding-star and evil genius of the Gallic mind. No nation like the French has done so much to identify and remain loyal to soul-states as such, yet this intrepid undertaking has reacted, and that painfully, upon the intellectual and artistic tendencies of those who were devoted to the inwardly true and beautiful. France has thus contributed to the culture of the world a dilettantism which has had the effect of clarifying and beautifying the soul-state without supplying it with reality. Such dilettantism, which almost invariably has been noble and effective, while not constructive, has been of a positive nature, so that it is never to be confused with that minor dilettantism which is so fugitive and superficial.

In French decadence, the excesses of dilettant culture assume their most perverse form, although no serious-minded critic should feel that decadence is to be regretted.

Given a positivistic age which devotes and surrenders itself to the exteriorizing influences of science and sociality, and the noble subjectivism of decadent art will not lack for appreciation among those who are still so bold as to believe that the inner life as such is worth while. The decadence of Gautier and Baudelaire can hardly be called one thing, that of Huysmans and Barrès another; two types appear, but they are capable of mutual understanding. In its more general form, decadence was a consciousness in which the over-ripe, the bizarre, and the depraved were expressed with all the subtlety of a nuance-loving mind. Viewed psychologically, rather than historically, decadence, for which Poe had prepared us if we had only understood his art, was an attempt to trace the roots of thought, feeling, and impulse down into the dark soil whence they had sprung. Such decadence was capable also of manufacturing soul-states when these were not found in natural consciousness. The ethical effect of all this was to place the decadent outside the sphere whose poles were nature and society, leaving him in a position anti-natural and anti-social. Huysmans, in his novel, *Against the Grain*, persuades his hero to withdraw from the world of nature and society; Barrès attempts more militant methods, so that he becomes egoist and decadent at one and the same time.

For all this French dilettant culture is answerable, since French science and art have never been willing to assume appropriate metaphysical and moral responsibility. At times, the artist concludes that his character is guilty of too much thinking, as was the case with Flaubert; again, he seems determined to raise the intellectual, introspective tendency to an excessive height; seldom, if ever, does the Gallic artist indicate the right kind and due amount of intellectualism which is necessary for solving the problem of life. At the same time, it is not impossible to praise the French for the dilettantism which has had the fate to assume the decadent form with all the diabolism which is incident upon it. Were life and art always sincere and noble, the value of decadence would be nothing, less than nothing; then, perhaps, decadence had not arisen. But,

when the issues of life become almost wholly utilitarian, so that the sense of free beauty is threatened by the adoration of use, it is a matter of satisfaction that decadence with its morbidness comes in to neutralize the effect of Philistinism. Whenever scientific and social thinking attempt to draw around the human soul the narrow circle of "nature" and "society," the soul is justified in employing practically any expedient in the attempt to escape from the snare. Hence, while the decadent rebellion was one of mood rather than of purpose, those who consider decadence from the outside are privileged to assert that, since the human soul is capable of such phantasies, it is vain to dictate just what human feelings and motives should be. In a decadent state, if such a thing were possible, the individual would have the privilege of possessing and enjoying his own inner life for better or for worse; in an industrial state, as this is being built about the sons of men, the demands of utility and efficiency are such that all must have practically the same ideas, must respond to practically the same motives. Decadence and dilettant culture may thus be regarded as a protest against and a salvation from the encroachments of an impersonal industrial order. For this way of escape the world is indebted to the French genius, which has always upheld the cause of the fine and significant.

With the French, dilettantism in culture has always been of an individualistic character, although the French themselves have not taken the leading place in the ethics of individualism. To the pioneers of French thought, *le moi*, as this appears in Pascal and Descartes, was supreme; Pascal may have found it hateful, Descartes inconsequent, but without it they had thought in vain. Rousseau, likewise, with all his fondness for the social order, was an individualist of the most advanced type. With Romanticism and Realism, the influence of the ego was predominating. It is true that, in the case of De Vigny, the ego was ineffective, was "powerful but alone—*puissant et solitaire*," but its ethical worth was no less marked. Stendhal made his egos more exalted and effective, although the contem-

porary individualist must draw his strength and inspiration from additional sources, such as Dostoievsky's novel and Ibsen's drama. Nevertheless, the intellectual dilettantism of Stendhal and De Vigny did not fail to crystallize in a philosophy of selfhood.

The dilettantism of the decadence was likewise an influence for individualism, for decadence had the effect of making the inner life supreme in its art. Baudelaire felt the presence of the superman, *le surhomme*, within his own morbid soul, just as Barrès established a kind of egoism when he laid down the principles of *culte du moi*. Then, too, Barrès used his decadence to aid him in solving a problem which is one of the most perplexing of current questions: the reconciliation of selfhood and society. With Huysmans, the individualism of a decadent dilettantism assumes an absurd form, but no more absurd in its way than the average work on sociology. Huysmans makes of his Des Esseintes, in *Against the Grain*, an advocate of perfect inner existence in which nothing natural or social is allowed to stream in, but the contrite social thinker locks the individual out just as surely as Des Esseintes locked himself in. France had neither an Ibsen or Wagner to turn Scandinavian Sagas into the individualism of the Strong One; the limits of Gallic art would forbid this; yet France has been able to perfect the idea of the individual as the Fine One, the man who has the courage to adhere to his æsthetic ideals, even when he knows they be dilettant.

The dilettant culture of France seems then to have its place in the larger culture of humanity. It is true that French intellectualism has not succeeded in finding a foundation for its sentiments of truth, beauty, and goodness, true that in some instances it has tended to place the beautiful in a position superior to that allotted to the true and the good. Yet, without a metaphysical basis for its arts, morals, and sciences, it has not failed to give these a coloring which relieves somewhat of the drab of Anglican and Teutonic culture.

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